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Tweaking and Cleaning Up Data Visualizations: The Role of Adobe Illustrator

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On the left is a visualization created using R and tweaked in stages using Adobe Illustrator to what you see on the right. The in-depth tutorial can be accessed by clicking the picture above.

If you have ever used a data visualization tool, be it Microsoft Excel, Tableau, R, or any of the multitude of tools out there, you have most likely encountered a situation where there was something relatively simple you wanted to do to your visualization, but couldn't figure out how without spending hours looking for and finally implementing a roundabout solution. Maybe it was swapping in specific colors palette, or adding and deleting a line or two, or adjusting spacing between elements. The fact of the matter is that it can be challenging to create a visualization using only one tool. Adobe Illustrator plays an important role in addressing this problem by allowing you to make direct, manual changes to “tweak” and “clean up” a visualization.

As with all things, there are three caveats that you should be aware of when utilizing Adobe Illustrator as a data visualization tweaker/cleaner:

- Your data visualization should be in a vector file format, NOT a raster file format. That means you will need to be able to export your visualization as a vector file format (.svg, .eps, .pdf, .ai) and load it into Adobe Illustrator to be able to make the changes that you want.
- If you are new to the Adobe programs, you may be overwhelmed. Adobe Illustrator is a professional graphic design tool that has a LOT of features. Ask for help! The steps to make adjustments in Illustrator are usually very simple and straightforward once you are shown how to do it. Feel free to send me an email or [schedule a consultation!](#)
- Along with the power to directly change every aspect and element within your visualization comes the time sink for making lots of manual changes as well as the disconnection between your data and your visualization. Make sure you are mostly complete with the substance of your visualization before moving to Adobe Illustrator for final touches.

Here are just a few common ways you may want to use Adobe Illustrator for any final tweaks:

- Add text, annotations, and labels in any position and orientation on your visualization.
- Add visual elements such as lines, callouts, and shaded areas.
- Delete visual elements such as boxed areas, gridlines, and anything that might take away from the visual clarity and readability of your visualization.
- Assign specific colors to any visual element, like shapes, bars, and lines.
- Adjust spacing if labels are too close together or your visualization need to be compressed to fit specific dimensions.

Alli Torban has [a short post](#) on bringing a visualization from [RAWgraph](#) (a free, web-based data visualization tool) and cleaning it up in Adobe Illustrator. We will be doing a demo if this tool in April – [click here to register](#).

[Click here](#) to learn more about your eligibility to use Adobe Illustrator as an Ohio State Affiliate. You can also request to use Adobe products such as Illustrator through our [remote computer lab](#) during business hours.

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